

Recognizing and Meeting the Needs of Beginning Teachers

Beginning teachers' needs vary widely, as each novice brings a different perspective, experience, and knowledge base about teaching. Further, there are differences in preferred methods of problem-solving, learning styles, and educational philosophies. However, there are some generalizations that can be made about the needs, expectations and emotional phases during the first year of teaching.

In a study conducted by Simon Veenman (1984), more than one thousand preservice teachers ranked their concerns before entering the classroom for the first time. The perceived needs of these novices are consistent with other research studies on beginning teacher concerns (Bullough, 1989; Odell, 1986; Covert, et.al., 1991). These studies identify concerns about students; controlling and managing, motivating, evaluating, and differentiating instruction. They also point to concerns about managing time; for planning, scheduling, completing work load and balancing personal and professional life. Other concerns include relations with colleagues, administrators and parents. As we might imagine, beginning teachers worry about knowing what to do, when to do it and whether or not they will do it well.

Phases of First Year Teaching

Ellen Moir, Director of the New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz and her colleagues, have identified a series of mental and emotional challenges that occur in developmental phases across the first year of practice. They note that while every new teacher does not go through this exact sequence, these generalizations are a useful map for predicting and responding to the needs of novices. The six phases described in their work are; Anticipation, Survival, Disillusionment, Rejuvenation, Reflection and Anticipation (Moir, 1999).

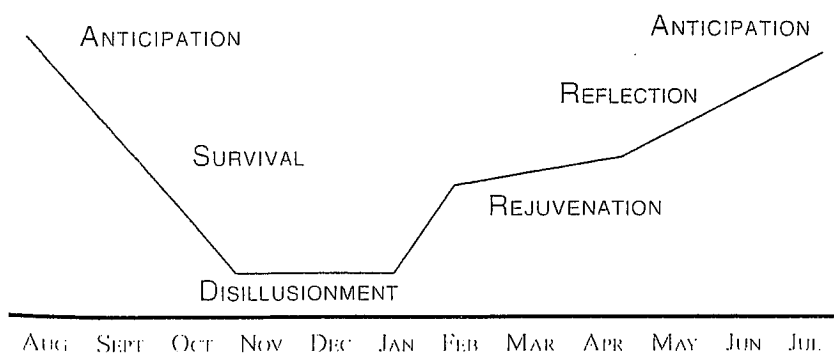
For novices, it is useful to understand that these phases are likely to occur as a normal part of their first year in teaching. As mentors, awareness of

and sensitivity to these phases helps us to maintain a developmentally appropriate balance of support and challenge while facilitating professional vision.

The following pages correlate these identified phases with some ideas for providing that balance as a learning-focused mentor.

Adapted from Moir, E. (1999).
The stages of a teacher's first year.
In M. Scherer (Ed). *A Better
Beginning: Supporting and
Mentoring New Teachers*.
Alexandria, VA: ASCD

Phases of First Year Teaching



MENTORING MATTERS

Anticipation

It is August and Janice is excited and anxious about the beginning of her first school year. She is confident of her knowledge and has a passion for making a difference in students' lives. She can't wait to set up her room and organize materials. It will definitely be different to have a classroom of her own.

New teachers begin to anticipate their first year of formal work during their student teaching experiences. They enter their classrooms with a commitment to making a difference and an often vague and idealistic sense of how to reach their goals. Major concerns at this time are setting up the classroom, locating teaching materials, establishing relationships with colleagues, support staff and administrators and establishing relationships with students and parents. The press of tasks and the emotional rush of new responsibilities often propel novices through their first weeks on the job.

- SUPPORT

Offer support during the Anticipation phase by providing information regarding materials, procedures, first day activities, and mandated paperwork for opening school. Set aside time to think out loud about your own strategies and rationales for room arrangements, first day activities, contact with parents and support services. Collaborative opportunities may present themselves as you jointly plan for the first day or week of school.

- CHALLENGE

Maintain a learning focus by having a goal-setting conversation. Establish some initial goals for learning and for the mentor-protégé relationship. Use national, state or district standards combined with the novice's assessment of needs (see Section Seven, Appendix) to be sure the goals are relevant and reasonable. Discuss ways that you will monitor your progress and celebrate your successes.

- FACILITATE VISION

Ask your protégé to articulate his or her idea of the ideal teacher. Share your own vision of professionalism. Expand the conversation to consider the ideal classroom and connect to the established goals. Remember to balance long-term thinking with support in the short-term. Assure your colleague that for now, it's fine to take it one day at a time.

Survival

It is Saturday night, September 30, and the realities of being a teacher are beginning to sink in. Janice is spending at least half of each weekend and most weeknights trying to keep up. She struggles with managing lesson plans, record-keeping, parent meetings and progress reports. She wonders if she really can do it.

The realities of the day-to-day work of the classroom soon bear down upon new teachers. They are faced with many different problems for the first time and have few of the routines and tricks-of-the-trade in their repertoires that help veteran teachers conserve time and energy. Most are running hard to stay in place and have little time for reflection or advanced planning. Many new teachers spend up to seventy hours a week on schoolwork. Often the core curriculum materials are unfamiliar and the novice teacher is only one or two lessons ahead of the class in preparation for future lessons. There is a constant need to learn the curriculum, develop instructional plans, learn and develop assessment systems, correct student work and develop and gather materials. Many novices do not accurately anticipate the amount of work their chosen profession requires, but most manage to maintain their energy and commitment to student learning during this phase.

• SUPPORT

Offer support during the survival phase by sharing materials and management tips. Time is precious and may not best be spent reinventing the wheel. Share tips for establishing routines and managing the activities of the day. Keep it learning-focused by thinking aloud about your choice points and purposes. You may wish to keep note cards handy during the day to record effective techniques that may be unconscious and automatized for you, but would be useful to share with your protégé. Attend fully and listen empathetically as frustrations and concerns arise. As appropriate, invite your protégé to observe in your classroom, or offer to model a lesson.

• CHALLENGE

Ask questions that help your protégé recognize effective choices. Offer your ideas as a menu. Ask your protégé to share thoughts about what might work best, and why. Gently challenge by asking your protégé to keep a structured Reflection Journal (see Section Eight, Structured Forms, Tools and Blacklines) and use the recording to focus your conversations.

• FACILITATE VISION

Celebrate the goals already achieved (or sub-sets of them) and set new ones. Have conversations about what drew you to teaching, what's been important and/or rewarding to you. Ask your protégé to talk about what made teaching an attractive career choice.

Disillusionment

Everything seems to be going wrong. Janice's evaluation observations did not go as she had planned. The experiments did not work, the students did not participate and she lost the supplemental handout for the integrating activity. Maybe she should never have taken this job, or even become a teacher. Maybe it is not too late to find another career.

After working seemingly nonstop for six to eight weeks, new teachers often 'hit-the-wall', entering a phase of disillusionment. This phase varies in intensity and duration as novice teachers begin to question their commitment, capability and self-worth. These factors, combined with fatigue, can weaken immune systems. It is not uncommon for new teachers to get sick at this time.

Several temporal events add to the tension and stress at this point. Back-to-school night arrives triggering stage fright and concerns about parents questioning both their competence and character. The first round of parent conferences soon follows with both time demands that cut into preparation for class and anxiety about relationships with parents. And the first formal evaluation by the principal occurs. Lack of familiarity with the process and, in some cases, the principal, adds to the stress load. Most often, the new teacher overprepares a 'showcase' lesson that consumes most of whatever planning time was available.

It is not uncommon for classroom management concerns and the needs of specific students to occupy much of the novice's attention. Routines and response patterns are not yet firmly established and mentors often find their counsel is sought and or required in these matters. Deeper issues of teaching and learning often have to wait until these issues are resolved or stabilized.

This phase is usually the toughest challenge the first year teacher has to overcome. Self-doubt and pressures from family members and friends complaining about the time that teaching seems to take away from their relationships add weight to the burden new teachers carry.

• SUPPORT

Continue to assist by sharing materials and tips for managing paperwork and conserving energy. Focus on what has been accomplished and learned to this point. Assist in the abandonment of unnecessary or ineffective routines and procedures. Collaborate by jointly planning for open house. Think aloud regarding parent conferences and first semester assessments and grading.

Acknowledge feelings of inadequacy without dismissing them by suggesting that they will just go away. Check in often and watch for cues from your protégé regarding needs. Assure your colleague that every educator experiences periods of disillusionment and everyone makes mistakes and feels insecurities.

Debunk the myth of professional certainty. Let your protégé know that you do not have all the right answers either, because there aren't any. Emphasize that there is best choice, based on best knowledge at the time, given the context of the situation.

- CHALLENGE

Create challenge by helping your protégé learn from experience. Coach thinking and support reflection. Collaborate on methods for refining practice. If the structured Reflection Journal seems burdensome, use quick forms to focus conversations (see Section Three, Maximizing Time and Attention). Pay close attention to signals that you're pushing beyond 'whelm' into overwhelm.

- FACILITATE VISION

Facilitate professional vision by calibrating existing state and expectations for a novice teacher with the desired state and goals to be accomplished by the end of the first year. Ask your protégé to identify some examples of growth thus far and share specific, concrete things you have observed. Continue to connect the protégé with other staff members, building a sense of community.

Rejuvenation

Wow! The job seems much more doable after two weeks away. Time away has allowed Janice to reconnect with friends, family and herself. As she reflected on the first half of her year, she was amazed at how much she had accomplished and learned. Beginning the second semester, routines are in place and her expectations much more realistic. Counting down to the end clearly shows she's made it through the first half, with summer vacation coming into view.

For teachers on a traditional calendar, the winter break marks a transition in the pace and flow of the school year. Time away with family and friends reminds new teachers of their life outside of the classroom. Rest and relaxation re-energizes body and soul. With new outlooks come a glimmer of perspective and an emerging sense that this is a learnable profession, one that with time and attention, can be mastered.

Many novice teachers return from break with a clearer understanding of the realities of their classroom, the system in which they work, and ways to access available resources. They begin to have a small sense of their accomplishments as well.

Confidence in routines and relationships increases as the novice automatizes patterns for behavior, time and instructional management. These, in turn, free time and energy for explorations of curriculum development, new teaching strategies and longer term planning.

MENTORING MATTERS

This phase tends to last into the spring with a few bumps and surprises along the way. As the end of the year appears on the horizon, concerns emerge about getting everything covered and everything done. Worries often arise about students' academic performance and novices may question their own instructional competence.

- SUPPORT

Celebrate, share and mark goals achieved and milestones passed. Be proactive in helping your protégé begin to organize for the end of the school year.

- CHALLENGE

Continue to challenge by focusing on instructional outcomes and cause-effect results. Inquire about new learnings and applications. Assist in analyzing student outcomes. Seek collaborative opportunities to team-teach. Plan for professional development opportunities and mutually construct implementation and evaluation plans for trying out new ideas. Meet and discuss the results and learnings from implementation. Engage in conversation cycles of planning, observation/data collection and reflection.

- FACILITATE VISION

Collaborate with your protégé—plan a field trip or create a shared unit of instruction. Let your colleague take the lead, and follow his or her wise counsel. Try something new your protégé has suggested and ask for some coaching.

Reflection

Three weeks and counting! Janice recognizes the tremendous amount of growth she's experienced this year and feels pride in her accomplishments. As she thinks back, there are things she would never try again or would choose to do very differently. Next year will be exciting. She will not be the newest kid on the block and she has a workable plan for managing time and tasks. Janice also has greater comfort with content knowledge and setting expectations for students.

The last weeks of the first year are a time for reflecting and taking stock. Mentors support novice teachers by helping them to remember all they have learned, what worked, what was modified, what was set-aside, and to consider what might happen differently the following year.

SECTION ONE: THE MENTOR'S ROLE

End-of-the-year routines require time and energy at this phase. Parent communication, closing up the classroom and a mountain of paperwork demand attention to detail. For many, the emotional leave-taking from the first class or classes marks this moment in time.

- **SUPPORT**

Offer support during the reflective phase by providing information and tips regarding end-of-year paperwork. Share your routines for organizing end-of-year tasks. Make a gift pack of colored markers, tape and stickers for labeling boxes. Start a list of items to order for next year.

- **CHALLENGE**

Mediate a rigorous analysis and interpretation of student performance information. Facilitate reflection through learning-focused conversations; surfacing insights, applications, and goals for the coming year.

- **FACILITATE VISION**

Do a gap analysis. Make connections between what was expected, what was desired and what actually occurred. Explore student successes and mark the specific turning points for them and your protégé. Collaborate on constructing a professional growth plan for the coming year.

And Celebrate!

The Calendar of Options on the next few pages offers an array of ideas for a learning-focused first year organized by phases of beginning teaching, and research on the concerns of new teachers.